commonwealth essays and studies

Commonwealth Essays and Studies

42.1 | 2019
Revolution(s)

The Crisis of Postcolonial Modernity: Queer Adolescence in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* and P. Parivaraj's *Shiva and Arun*

Sandeep Bakshi

OpenEdition Journals

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ces/776
DOI: 10.4000/ces.776
ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher
SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Electronic reference
Sandeep Bakshi, « The Crisis of Postcolonial Modernity: Queer Adolescence in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* and P. Parivaraj's *Shiva and Arun* », *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 42.1 | 2019, Online since 20 December 2019, connection on 28 January 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/ces/776 ; DOI : 10.4000/ces.776

The Crisis of Postcolonial Modernity: Queer Adolescence in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* and P. Parivaraj's *Shiva and Arun*

Sandeep Bakshi

1 The decolonial concept of "coloniality of power" expounded by Aníbal Quijano and Walter Mignolo appears particularly apposite in relation to postcolonial social formations whereby discursive legacies of colonisation, such as modernity, rationality and progress, continue their operations of "management and control" (Mignolo 2018, 143).[1] As Mignolo suggests, "surrounding the idea of modernity is a discourse that promises happiness and salvation through conversion, progress, civilization, modernization, development, and market democracy" (142). Coloniality of power connects colonial to postcolonial societies such that formal decolonisation or independence from European imperial powers does not necessarily translate into dismantling structures of power in postcolonial societies. The following essay therefore focuses on those continuities of power held over subaltern subjects, such as women, queers and ethnic/caste subalterns for whom the coloniality of power – a fully functioning legacy of colonisation – is the most manifest in South Asia. Holding on to the usefulness of notions such as "revolution as evolution" in terms of independence from European powers and the temporal marker "post" of the postcolonial, i.e., the revolution that would encompass an evolution in time, I scrutinise the inability of this evolution to transform colonial into postcolonial modernity. Through a reading of queer adolescent fiction from South Asia, this essay analyses the contours of the promise of decolonisation from imperial powers, which materialises as a series of muted revolutions or revolutions-in-waiting.

2 In terms of staging the vexed encounter between queer adolescence, adulthood and postcolonial modernity, Shyam Selvadurai's first novel *Funny Boy* (1994) and P. Parivaraj's sole novel *Shiva and Arun* (1998) provide a generative ground for critical

investigation. Selvadurai's work engages with the narrative of unconventional childhood and adolescence, and Parivaraj's story addresses the question of queer adolescence and its continuation as well as disruption in adulthood. Set in Sri Lanka in the 1970s, *Funny Boy* recounts the gay childhood and adolescence of Arjie Chelvaratnam, the son of an affluent Tamil family. The narrative comprises six stories focusing on Arjie's relationship with one particular character represented as "subaltern in terms of race, sexuality or gender" (Rao 1997, 118). Documenting the Tamil/Sinhala interethnic rifts, the novel culminates in the 1983 riots when Arjie's family flee to Canada. Parivaraj's work narrates the queer experience of two adolescent boys, Shiva and Arun, in a small South-Indian town and captures the differing trajectories of the boys. Whilst Shiva's homosexuality leads to his eventual suicide, Arun faces the patriarchal ire to defend his queer identity. I suggest that the two narratives are significant in the manifold ways in which the materialisation of queer subjectivity in South Asia forms a fraught relationship to the category of the modern. In this regard, without implicating queerness in homonationalist tropes, my analysis signals how gay adolescence problematises the "queer" coming of age of postcolonial South Asian fiction.

Eurocentric modernity

3 Modernity, in decolonial thought, refers to the privilege of the Western world-system through its stake in modern forms of knowledge production, the idealisation of the French revolution as the originating point of human resistance and the secularisation of Christianity. These three key events mark the suturing of modernity to the West even though it remains an unfinished project. Further, as Enrique Dussel argues, it "appears when Europe affirms itself as the "center" of a World History that it inaugurates; the periphery that surrounds this center is consequently part of its self-definition" (1993, 65). In this regard, Mignolo prefers the conceptualisation of the "rhetoric of modernity" which articulates itself through "modernity/coloniality" (2018, 230). The embedded binaries of tradition/modernity, old/new and nonmodern/modern acquire renewed sustenance through an assumed linear notion of time and history, which configures Europe/the West at the centre of time and modernity. The nonmodern in this configuration "is a flexible concept – not always mentioned – but presupposed and necessary for the invention, in the present, of underdeveloped uncivilized people: all that has to catch up to become modern" (Mignolo 2018, 117). Such universalising assumptions of Europe as the originary social, institutional and economic formation simultaneously imbricate the postcolonial worlds in teleological narratives of development and progress.

4 Considered in relation to global queer paradigms, decoloniality's challenge to Euro-American modernity bears critical significance in terms of temporal distinctions that delineate the global North as a progressive/modern site of homosexual emancipation because of its visible queer movements. In such readings, the global South embodies, as Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin Manalansan observe, "a premodern, pre-political, non-Euro-American queerness" that must follow Western identity categories "in order to attain political consciousness, subjectivity, and global modernity" (2002, 5–6). In addition, the deployment of queerness as a marker of Western modernity and US exceptionalism is the focus of Jasbir Puar's theorisation of homonationalism. She

explains how queer human rights discourse becomes complicit with a masculinist agenda of nationalism (2007, 49–50).

5 A growing cohort of queer scholars has been re-examining and disputing the Western narrative of historical time as organised around the principle of linearity. Gayatri Gopinath, for example, develops the notion of a queer South Asian diaspora "as a conceptual apparatus that poses a critique of modernity and its various narratives of progress," thus unsettling the colonial construction of Third-World sexualities as "anterior, pre-modern and in need of Western political development" (2005, 12). Similarly, Heather Love explains that since queer identities often appear as "a backward race" and "modernity's backward children," queer theorists must "take exception to the idea of a linear, triumphalist view of history" (2007, 3–7). Finally, Kathryn Bond Stockton's analysis of childhood and "its intimate relations with queerness" interrupts "the vertical, forward-motion metaphor of growing up" in twentieth-century literature (2009, 11). Borrowing from these sophisticated queer readings, I suggest that the novels provide a complex terrain of non-normative representation whereby same-sex desire in adolescence in the South Asian context prompts an interrogation of the category of modernity in postcolonial geography.

The queer nonmodern

6 Given the persistence of the discourse whereby non-Western discursive formations appear nonmodern,[2] the displacement of the Eurocentric stagist conception of historical time as uncritical linear movement becomes particularly apposite to comprehend the emerging queer discourse in South Asia that does not necessarily emanate from Euro-American queerness. I contend that Selvadurai and Parivaraj utilise queer South Asian adolescence as a focal point to disrupt eurocentred formulations of tradition and modernity. The protagonists of *Funny Boy* and *Shiva and Arun* appear as sexual subjects and thus challenge the conventional view of "oriental" boys as available objects of desire. Louis Lo suggests that Arjie in *Funny Boy* cannot be called "homosexual" since the term "comes from Western, Christian, medical discourse" (2018, 203). Representations of non-normative desire in adolescence and adulthood in the South Asian context, as depicted in the novels, inevitably encompass a complex debate about the status of modernity in postcolonial spaces. Both novels explore questions of modernity whereby queer adolescence and adulthood in South Asia appear inextricably interlocked with the experience of postcolonial modernity. In my reading of Selvadurai and Parivaraj, therefore, I attempt to align queerness to postcolonial sites revealing a complex resignification of class, caste, ethnicity and religion.

7 Selvadurai and Parivaraj's narratives raise concerns over the status of postcolonial modernity through a process of interrogation of queer adolescence in South Asia. In fiction, queer identity construction hinges on teenage representations that produce the oft-celebrated genre of coming-out narratives since "most texts describe a boy in his *early teens* from a middle-class home" (Saxey 2008, 40, emphasis added). Although working within the parameters of the Western coming-out story, *Funny Boy* and *Shiva and Arun* rework the narrative of adolescent identity-in-crisis from the South Asian perspective. As the protagonists struggle with their respective closets, the novels signal a larger crisis of postcolonial definition of modernity, which refuses to be subsumed under Western classification of modern/non-modern binary, and simultaneously

documents the difficulty of articulating queer subjectivity in the multiply-severed contexts of language, regional and ethnic identity, class and religion. If the novels represent the birth of modern queer subjectivity in South Asia, then this emergence carefully distances itself from any Eurocentric discourse.

8 In his examination of Selvadurai's account, Andrew Lesk laments the unavailability of a Western-style identity politics of homosexuality in Sri Lanka. For him, "despite its cultural Westernization, [Sri Lanka] does not favour the liberating sexual alternates" and "a certain sense of Western modernity and its attendant emancipatory trappings is [...] most underdeveloped" (2006, 35-36). Such a trenchant critique of Sri Lanka epitomises an orientalising tendency to make Euro-America the central point of reference in queer practices. Lesk's argument implicitly legitimises patronising assumptions built on a systematic dichotomy of the "progressive" West and the "underdeveloped" (both economically and culturally) Third World. By fixing the terms of modernity as a Western prerogative, it forecloses the possibility of a queer discourse arising from South Asia.

9 Although Lesk's critique serves to highlight the political inscription of global (Western) and local (South Asian) sites, it implicitly raises questions about postcolonial modernity and its relation to queerness in both novels. Queer adolescence becomes central to what I term the crisis of postcolonial modernity since concern about identity and identification that underline both same-sex narratives and the "in-between" period of adolescence interpellates the Eurocentric binary of tradition/modernity in several ways. As such, questions of caste, class, ethnicity, religion and language become intertwined with the representation of South Asian queer adolescence so that the identity crises of the protagonists mimic and inevitably interrogate the status of modernity in postcolonial spaces.

The queer nonmodern and heteropatriarchy

10 Following the convention of coming-out accounts, *Funny Boy* and *Shiva and Arun* frame the narratives within the distinctive component of exploration of the gender binary that differentiates the queer story from other non-queer fiction. Simultaneously, they depart from these Western models through an explicit cross-gender identification/solidarity, often absent in the former. For instance, in Edmund White's much-acclaimed work *A Boy's Own Story* (1982), the narrator's early realisation of his unconventional behaviour as a "sissy" serves as a key signifier of the narrator's homosexuality (2002, 7). As an identifiable physical trait therefore, effeminacy is policed and reprimanded and becomes central in the struggle to "love a man but not to be a homosexual" at the end of White's novel (238). In her critical investigation of coming-out fiction, Esther Saxey ascribes this suppression of effeminacy to "femme-phobia" or centrality of the "plot of concealment and revelation" whereby "it is common for a text to present a protagonist who isn't overtly feminine or camp" (2008, 46). In this respect, White's narrator embodies a particular misogyny, especially regarding his mother, that several scholars attribute to gay male representations. However, both Shiva in *Shiva and Arun* and Arjie in *Funny Boy* deflect from the privilege of their masculine gender to produce a bond with other-gendered subjects of shared oppression. Shiva's sister Shanti is "more than a friend—she was his confidant" and Shiva is the sole person who is willing to help Shanti in the household chores when their mother is ill (Parivaraj 1998, 21). Shiva,

Shanti and their mother constitute a triad, resisting the father's demand to send Shiva to a Sanskrit school in order to become a Hindu priest like him and his elder son, Govinda (22).

11 The novels disrupt the traditional assumption of a naturalised link between heterosexuality and patriarchy through an implicit construction of queerness in opposition to the expectation of the father. Heteropatriarchy and heteronormalisation invariably function in tandem to deny the existence of a queer subject. This denial becomes more obvious when the queer subject is in a direct relation of subordination, such as the adolescent, so that the adult father appears as the key signifier of oppressive heteropatriarchy, embodying the threat to the non-normative identification of the queer teenager. The adolescents therefore construct their identity in an oppositional relation to their father. For instance, Shiva does not know "what his father really thought or felt about him" and therefore avoids him "because he would ask questions that always seemed difficult for a young person to answer" (Parivaraj 1998, 43, 20). He does not wish to follow the paternal occupation of being a priest but wants to go to college instead. College entails "the first step out of this house, away from his father's domination" (26). The novel figures this escape from heteropatriarchy as a crucial site of sexual freedom and queer subjectivity.

12 Similarly, Arun shares a problematic relationship with his father. Their relationship culminates in an open conflict when Arun refuses to marry according to his father's wishes and openly declares his homosexuality at the point of transition from adolescence to adulthood. Like Shiva, he does not follow the paternal profession although his younger brother Chitti "seemed to have no option but to join his father" as a building contractor (Parivaraj 1998, 121). Arun's decision to continue his studies to become a teacher after his graduation becomes "a point of contention with his father" (121). In contrast to Shiva, Arun overtly challenges paternal authority by refusing to marry and moving out of the family home. In addition, the novel connects subjects of shared oppression in a framework of solidarity through a trenchant critique of the father's wish to impose heterosexuality upon Arun. For instance, it ends with the powerful image of the inclusion of queer sexuality in the family structure and the marginalisation of the patriarch. Arun's sister Jyothi and his mother, who can be considered as conventional victims of patriarchy in terms of gender, forge a bond with Arun which contests the power of his father.

13 In *Funny Boy*, Arjie poses a direct threat to heteropatriarchy by his passion for cross-dressing, and the relation with his father is based upon mutual avoidance. Nevertheless, when the adults discover Arjie's penchant for becoming the bride, the patriarch's intervention re-establishes the heteronormative order. His father's worry that Arjie may "turn out funny like that Rankotwera boy" and become "the laughing-stock of Colombo" prompts his mother to force Arjie to play cricket with the boys even though she is unable to comprehend her husband's anxiety (Selvadurai 1994, 14). The effeminate Rankotwera boy appears as the maligned other and for his father, Arjie must be protected against such influences. Thus, he is rather pleased when his friend's son and his new employee Jegan befriends Arjie. For him, the absence of masculine identity, apparent in Arjie's unconventional activities such as playing with dolls and reading can be redressed in the company of a male influence like Jegan. Arjie's father thus embodies the threat of patriarchal homophobia in the novel such that queerness

can only appear as a temporary chapter in the attainment of heteronormative adulthood.

14 Patriarchal homophobia manifests its control when Arjie's father withdraws Arjie from St. Gabriel's school and enrols him in the Queen Victoria Academy, the school that his brother Diggy attends. Explaining his decision, he asserts that "the [Victoria] Academy will force you to become a man" (1994, 210). The paternal homophobic fear of Arjie's non-normative identity can only be overcome by calling to aid another "bastion of patriarchy," which is equally a "colonial vestige of the British public-school system" (Pennell and Stephens 2002, 181). This apparatus of patriarchal control is the colonial-style all-boys school where, as Diggy warns Arjie, "you take it like a man" (Selvadurai 1994, 211). Diggy's comment explicitly points to the hegemonic model of masculinity that the school deploys for the construction of boyhood/manhood of its pupils. Although Arjie submits to his father's wish, the homosocial space of the institution allows him to embark on his first homosexual relationship with his classmate Shehan. The colonial/patriarchal enterprise of "becoming a man" is queered to reclaim the homosocial realm and re-signify it as a homosexual space.

15 Furthermore, the novel becomes a potent critique of gendered hierarchies. Like *Shiva and Arun*, it reinforces the alliance of queer subjects and women. By placing Arjie at the centre of such associations, the novel effectively challenges the dominant order from a queer perspective. Arjie's bond with Radha Aunty and his mother highlights the identification of the queer subject with the subjects of patriarchal subordination. The second story of the novel centres on Radha Aunty and her aborted attempt to love across the Tamil/Sinhalese ethnic divide. After pursuing her studies in the United States, she returns to Sri Lanka and commences a romantic liaison with a Sinhala boy, Anil. As a transgressive subject herself, Radha Aunty becomes an ally to Arjie's transgression of the gender binary: "She painted my eyelids with blue shadow, put rouge on my cheeks" (Selvadurai 1994, 49). Arjie's bond with her enables him to comprehend that romantic love and family operate in opposition to each other as Radha Aunty concedes to an arranged marriage. Conventional narratives of romantic love in western discourse often use the choice of partner as a metric for postcolonial modern subjectivity. However, Radha Aunty's embrace of an arranged marriage complicates such facile readings. Similarly, Arjie's identification with his mother develops beyond the "pleasure of watching Amma drape her sari" (15). In the third story of the novel, he witnesses once again the impossibility of a romantic union in the form of the adulterous liaison between his mother and her friend Daryl, a Sri Lankan burgher. Both the stories attest to the centrality of Arjie's observations as a privileged witness of the constraints of a patriarchal structure whereby romantic affection and love outside marriage for women systematically appear subservient to the demands of family.

The queer nonmodern and class, religion and ethnicity

16 In both novels, homosexuality becomes intelligible as one of the discursive sites of identification in its engagement with issues of class, caste, religion and ethnicity. The newness/modernity of Parivaraj and Selvadurai's texts lies in the contestation of dominant paradigms of class (master-servant), religion (Hindu-Muslim) and ethnic difference (Tamil-Sinhala) in South Asia since all three protagonists experience their

initial homosexual encounters with boys across class, caste and ethnic divide. Shiva's awareness of same-sex desire for his aunt's houseboy, Chinni, Arun's sexual awakening with the servant Krishna, and Arjie's renewed attraction to Shehan point to the interpellation in terms of class, caste and religious difference for the queer subject. Informed materialist critiques of queer politics underscore the immediacy of addressing inequalities of class in queer discourses.

17 Marxist scholars have advocated the inclusion of the analytic of class in queer debates such that queer formations can truly become agents of transformative criticism. In his critical assessment of the erasure of the dynamics of class in queer studies, Donald Morton argues that "for queer theory, class conflict turns out to be just another set of problems, marginal at best, which have no determinate relation to sexual politics" (1996, 475). Similarly, Rosemary Hennessy deplores "the formation of a gay/queer imaginary in both corporate and academic circles (that) also rests on the suppression of a class analysis" (2000, 139). However, the specificity of class, caste, religious and ethnic difference in India and Sri Lanka become central to the queer coming-out narratives in the novels. Same-sex desire and homosexual discovery are systematically structured around the severances of class, caste, religion and ethnicity, which characterise the postcolonial South Asian nations.

18 Shiva's foremost same-sex experience with Chinni critiques the organisation of a society/nation based on the dichotomy of master-servant and Brahmin-untouchable. As a Brahmin, whose father is a notable priest, Shiva is compelled to understand that Chinni, the untouchable and the servant, does not belong to the realm of humanity. Shiva realises that "Chinni wasn't a proper person or something" (Parivaraj 1998, 48). However, the novel contests the master-servant trope by staging the attraction of Shiva's desire for him. At home, when Chinni asks Shiva if he could bathe with him, Shiva is keenly aware of the inequalities of caste and class that separate them. He wonders, "Why in a so-called free India did people still accept it?" (50). Attempting to pulverise the class barriers, Shiva bathes with Chinni and they dry each other immediately after their mutual ejaculation. The episode references the subversive potential of queer love to over-ride class barriers through the proximity of their bodies. Crucially, the emphasis on their same-sex experience defeats the potency of the master-servant hierarchy and re-arranges their roles in a more egalitarian framework. These transgressions are particularly unique in South Asian queer literature and similar examples include R. Raj Rao's novel *The Boyfriend* (2003) and Abha Dawesar's work *Babyji* (2005).

19 Shiva and Chinni's first experience of oral sex unsettles the impervious distinction between the two castes that occupy the highest and the lowest rung on the caste spectrum in India – the Brahmins and the Untouchables.[3] The disruption of the master/servant and the Brahmin/Untouchable dichotomy functions as a key feature of homosexual relations in fiction that threaten the coherence of a national(ist) narrative. Shiva is aware that "it was just so contrary to everything a Brahmin learnt" but, "in an instant, the sensation of what was happening overran all the old taboos!" (Parivaraj 1998, 56). Shiva's assertion that the "old taboos" were "somehow imposed by the elders and parents" condemns the perpetuation of rigid caste politics through the device of an inter-generational control (50). His repeated caresses of Chinni's body "from the balls [...] around the pubic 'nest' and up through the hair that ran in a fine line to Chinni's throat" defy the existing norms of social segregation (56). Thus, Shiva's discovery of

non-normative sexuality is closely aligned to the refusal to accept imposed constructs of social hierarchy.

20 Similar to Shiva's contestation of class categories, Arun's sexual involvement with the servant Krishna transcends the limitations of the master-servant trope. The name Krishna not only signals the inter-implication of queerness and religion, but in the context of the novel, associates the divine with the underprivileged class. Arun's encounter with Krishna explicitly threatens the hierarchy of a structural relation based on authority and subordination. Their first experience commences on the conversation about "handpumping" but mutual masturbation leads to sharing a bed together and falling asleep in an embrace (Parivaraj 1998, 92). Arun and Krishna reverse the received normative roles of the servant performing fellatio on the master. Arun (the putative master) lets Krishna's (the alleged servant's) sperm flow into his mouth before it runs "out of his mouth and onto the floor" (97). Arun's subsequent gesture of fetching "two glasses of water" secures the absolute subversion of the master-servant binary (99). It uncovers the fictive character of social hierarchy and affirms the queer subject's capacity to effectively contest as well as subvert it even though in a private gesture.

21 In *Funny Boy*, ethnic difference between Arjie and Shehan functions as a parallel subtext to Arjie's developing sense of his own queerness. In his assessment of Sri Lankan politics, Tariq Jazeel points to the "racialised polarisation of identity politics" in which Sinhalese and Tamil ethnicities "become the primary markers of identity" (2005, 232). In relation to the novel, Minoli Salgado observes a "reinforcement of constructed, essentialised ethnicities," bearing a direct contrast to Arjie's fluid gender identity (2007, 122; see also Gairola 2014). Arjie and Shehan's same-sex romantic union ironically reflects the dismemberment of the Sri Lankan state based on ethnic division and the last two stories place the question of queer adolescence at the centre of interethnic disharmony.

22 On the first day of Arjie's arrival at Victoria Academy, a fellow pupil, Salgado, questions Arjie's presence in a Sinhalese class even though he is Tamil. When Arjie explains that he has always attended Sinhalese classes and "didn't even speak Tamil" (216), Salgado dismisses the explanation and commands Arjie to go to the Tamil class. Although Shehan is Sinhalese, he comes to Arjie's rescue by using the rhetoric of the Sinhalese who want Tamils to assimilate: "But Salgado, aren't you always saying that Tamils should learn Sinhalese?" (Salvadurai 1994, 216). The increasingly violent interethnic disharmony is responsible for the separation of classes in the school. This divide is manifest in the incident that Arjie witnesses where Salgado and his friends corner a Tamil boy in a cubicle of the toilets in the school. Shehan explains to Arjie that the school is divided into two factions, the supporters of Black Tie, the principal who desires both Tamil and Sinhalese pupils to co-exist, and the followers of Lokubandara, the vice principal who wishes for a more "traditional, vernacular education" with emphasis on Buddhist-Sinhala heritage (220). The school becomes a microcosm of the competing ethnic versions of the nation.

23 Like Arun, Arjie subverts the relation between established hierarchies. Belonging to a Tamil minority, he needs the support of Shehan to survive in the Sinhala-dominated environment of the school. As their romance develops into a sexual relationship (with their first homosexual encounter in the garage of the Chelvaratnam house), it becomes implicitly dependent on a mutual offer of service and help. For instance, Shehan's long hair often results in unjust punishment by the principal Black Tie. Arjie realises that

"powerful people like Black Tie or my father [...] got to decide what was right or wrong" (Salvadurai 1994, 274). Arjie redresses the wrongs done to Shehan by disrupting the balance of power. Black Tie needs Arjie to recite poems at the school prize-giving event. As a Tamil, he appeals to the ethnic solidarity with Arjie. However, Black Tie's cruelty towards both Shehan and Arjie (punished and beaten when Arjie does not learn the poems properly) makes Arjie wonder about ethnic loyalty:

> I thought of Mr. Lokubandara and the way Salgado and his friends had assaulted that Tamil boy. I thought of the way Black Tie had beaten both Shehan and me. Was one better than the other? I didn't think so. Although I did not like what Mr. Lokubandra stood for, at the same time I felt that Black Tie was no better. (247)

Arjie's resistance to Black Tie's authoritarian management of the school consists of shaming Black Tie in public by consciously mixing up the verses of the poem on the day of the school gathering. For Arjie, the act becomes an attempt to seek justice for the unfair treatment of Shehan at the hands of Black Tie. When questioned by Shehan on the motive behind his act, Arjie replies, "I did it for you" (284). Arjie's disloyalty to ethnicity and family members who are disappointed at his failed recital reinforces the bond between Shehan and him.

24 Arjie's failed performance at the school prize-giving event crucially works as a mockery of an earlier colonial system of education, which extends into the "new" postcolonial nation. Arjie's "ultimate counter-performance," as Mita Banerjee observes, involves an assertive refusal to become an agent of colonial mimicry (2005, 155). The "post" in postcolonial inevitably suggests the transition from a colonial to a modern independent state. Black Tie, the homophobic principal, represents the earlier colonial model of education. Arjie's refusal to articulate the poems on which Black Tie's career depends becomes a critique of a former public-school system that can no longer wield the pressures of ethnic divisions in the modern postcolonial nation. By intentionally muddling the sentences of the English-language poems, which pay a tribute to the colonial situation, Arjie not only complicates the relation between the past and the present, the old and the new, but undermines the continuation of colonial public schools in modern Sri Lanka as well. Furthermore, the crisis of postcolonial modernity "jumbles all differences into a single performance of non-sense: the difference between the colonial and the postcolonial, as well as that between queerness and 'straight' sexual orientation" (Banerjee 2005, 155–56). Selvadurai demonstrates the agency of queer adolescence to upset the category of the postcolonial by incorporating colonial as well as postcolonial referents in Arjie's performance. The presence of the old colonial system in modern Sri Lanka, through cricket and the education system, hints at an incomplete decolonisation of South Asia. The modernity of the postcolonial nation defined by independence from a former colonial power becomes increasingly problematic as Arjie's performance repeatedly references the former colonial situation.

25 Another significant debate on the status of postcolonial modernity functions around the category of religion in *Shiva and Arun*. The hierarchical relationship of a modern West and a nonmodern South Asia is constructed around the distinction between secularised Christianity in the West and the continual inclusion of religion in South Asia.[4] Shiva and his Muslim friend Abdullah's lives in the novel are certainly dependent upon the demands of their respective religions. However, the novel queers both the religions in the bond that Shiva and Abdullah establish and thus makes a passionate plea for the queer sacred. For example, when Krishna enters Arun's room, he discovers the posters of male sportsmen juxtaposed with the "print of Lord Krishna and the

Milkmaids" (Parivaraj 1998, 92). The heterosexual eroticism that is usually associated with Lord Krishna and the milkmaids is queered when considered in relation to the Arun/Krishna sexual liaison. The significance of a "traditional" past to questions of queer identity in the "present" is further reinforced in Abdullah's struggle to explain the compatibility of Islam with homosexuality: "He had tried to tell his father about famous Muslim leaders and rulers who had both male and female love affairs" (123). By reclaiming a religious past, Abdullah attempts to legitimate his desire for men, just as a "Brahmin gay" would tell his father "that the *Kama Sutra* and the wall engravings at Puri temple were real" (124). The incorporation of putatively past sexual practices to frame Abdullah's sexuality reveals the potency of nonmodern, nonsecular forms to affect, in this case affirmatively, modern debates about queer identity. Outlining the pre-colonial archives as same-sex practices legitimises the claim to South Asian queerness in contemporary times without a recourse to the colonial interregnum. The genealogical connection between Abdullah's sexuality and South Asian pasts appears more significant than present-day Western models of queerness.

The queer nonmodern and language

26 Language also becomes a significant marker in the definition of postcolonial modernity in *Funny Boy*. Black Tie and Mr Lokubandara's struggle over Tamil/Sinhala education reflects the war of national language in Sri Lanka in the 1970s. The presence of English as the over-arching language of reference in the novel and in Sri Lanka further complicates the linguistic landscape. The language of the coloniser, English, affords privilege and power which is apparent in Amma's dealing with the police after Uncle Daryl's disappearance. Amma is able to hide the adulterous nature of her liaison with Uncle Daryl through recourse to English, which immediately signifies her superior status in Sri Lankan society (Selvadurai 1994, 127). However, English is made to signify a product of Western import that cannot embody the entirety of the Sri Lankan experience. The appended glossary of Sri Lankan terms at the end of the novel attests to the inadequacy of English in the Sri Lankan context.

27 Additionally, the repeated use of the adjective "funny" to define Arjie's homosexuality by the adults refers to the incompleteness of English to incorporate local versions of same-sex desire. Throughout the novel, Arjie's queerness appears as an attribute suggested by the term "funny" in the title. The persistent refusal to name and classify same-sex experience consolidates the resistance to Western practices of categorisation. Moreover, homophobia literalises as a Western influence and attaches to the Western lexicon in terms of English language. Tanuja, Arjie's cousin from Canada, brings terms of homophobic insult to the game of bride-bride. When Arjie refuses to let her play the bride, she calls him "a pansy," "a faggot," and "a sissy" (Selvadurai 1994, 11). Tanuja's act of naming (and consequently shaming) Arjie's queerness symbolises the Western practice of category formation. The general incomprehension of the insults by the group points to the local development of queer subjectivity in Sri Lanka whereby Arjie and his cousins categorically reject Western discourses of identity classification. Tanuja's isolation in the group literalises a critique of homophobia that becomes available in the novel through a Western construction of identity sites. This does not imply that homophobia is a Western import. Instead, it points to the ready availability

of homophobic slurs in English, which in other South Asian contexts are to a certain extent articulated through patriarchy as I suggest below.[5]

28 For all three protagonists, the realisation of homosexuality is embodied as a crisis of postcolonial modernity in terms of language. Arjie, Shiva and Arun attempt to formulate a critical vocabulary for their queerness. Although written in English, Selvadurai and Parivaraj's queer fiction signals the inability of the English language to articulate the multiply-positioned South Asian queer subjectivity. When asked by his brother Chitti whether he is a "homo," Arun responds: "That's a foreign brand name Chitti. I don't like it, but o.k. it's one way to describe me" (Parivaraj 1998, 152). Although spoken in English, the conversation between the brothers becomes symptomatic of the expropriation of English as an alien, non-Indian language. "Foreign brand name" is coterminous with the commodification of "gay" identities in Western capitalist systems that results in what Puar terms "queer consumer citizenship" (2007, 62), and which the South Asian queer subject runs the risk of replicating. Arun, Shiva and Abdullah define themselves in contrast to the Western construct of a homosexual identity as men "*who loved men*" (Parivaraj 1998, 116, italics in original). The urgency of describing his queerness becomes even more importunate when Arun's father confronts him on the question of marriage. Connecting homosexuality to effeminacy and paedophilia, the patriarch calls him a *chamma chacka* and disowns him, thereby effectively framing homophobia as integral to patriarchy (149). As a literal translation, *chamma chacka* implies that Arun is an effeminate man who has a penchant for cross-dressing. Again, Arun's retort – "I just don't want to get married because my sexual preference is for men not women" (150) – affirms the critical significance of self-definition which does not include the naming of sexuality as homosexual, gay or queer.

29 In this essay, I have argued for a reconsideration of queer adolescence in conjunction with a reading of specific sites of ethnicity, caste, class, religion and language in South Asia. I have also suggested that the illustration of queer subjectivity and queer self-definition in South Asia raises questions about the definition of modernity in the novels. The difficulty of defining queerness in the South Asian context reinforces the impossibility of postcolonial modernity, which complicates and revises the colonial version of the tradition/modern binary. Queer adolescence, as I have shown, disputes the applicability of Western/global constructs to examine queerness in South Asia appropriately. Despite the availability of Western identity categories through the presence of English in South Asia, the novels problematise the articulation of the South Asian queer subject by a disavowal of the English language. Simultaneously, the Arjie-Shehan, Shiva-Chinni and Arun-Krishna bonds underscore the importance of local alliances between marginalised subjects.

30 The novels signal an inclusion of queerness in South Asian fiction in English. As Jazeel argues, in relation to *Funny Boy*, the novels are "an important political intervention" (2005, 231). They belong to an emerging body of potentially subversive fiction that locates queer South Asian subjectivity as a site of contest and contradictions. The interaction between global queer narratives and local South Asian versions of same-sex desire appears as a fraught relationship. A significant shift in South Asian attitudes to the master discourse of the West is evident in the way these novels negotiate Western constructs such as modernity and sexuality. In the process, they expose the flaws of globalising discourses based on the principle of universalism, which is neither achievable nor desirable.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BANERJEE, Mita. 2005. "Queer Laughter: Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* and the Normative as Comic." In *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial*, edited by Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein, 149–60. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

BOSE, Purnima. 2010. "From Humanitarian Intervention to the Beautifying Mission: Afghan Women and Beauty Without Borders." *Genders* 51. http://www.genders.org/ g51/g51_bose.html.

CRUZ-MALAVÉ, Arnaldo, and Martin MANALANSAN, eds. 2002. *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*. New York: New York University Press.

DUSSEL, Enrique. 1993. "Eurocentrism and Modernity." *Boundary 2* 20, no. 3: 65–76.

GAIROLA, Rahul. 2014. "Limp Wrists, Inflammatory Punches: Violence, Masculinity, and Queer Sexuality in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*." *South Asian History and Culture* 5, no. 4: 475–89.

GOPINATH, Gayatri. 2005. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press.

HENNESSY, Rosemary. 2000. *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*. New York: Routledge.

JAZEEL, Tariq. 2005. "Because Pigs Can Fly: Sexuality, Race and the Geography of Difference in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*." *Gender, Place and Culture* 12, no. 2: 231–49.

LESK, Andrew. 2006. "Ambivalence at the Site of Authority: Desire and Difference in *Funny Boy*." *Canadian Literature* 190: 31–46.

LO, Louis. 2018. "Sexual/Textual Tendencies in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*." *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 44, no. 2: 199–224. http://www.concentric literature.url.tw/issues/ Contested_Modernity_Place_Space_and_Culture/8.pdf.

LOVE, Heather. 2007. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

MIGNOLO, Walter. 2018. "The Conceptual Triad: Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality." In *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, edited by Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh. Durham: Duke University Press. 135–52.

MORTON, David. 1996. "The Class Politics of Queer Theory." *College English* 58, no. 4: 471–82.

PARIVARAJ, P. 1998. *Shiva and Arun*. Norfolk: The Gay Men's Press.

PENNELL, Beverley and John STEPHENS. 2002. "Queering Heterotropic Spaces: Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* and Peter Wells's *Boy Overboard*." In *Ways of Being Male: Representing Masculinities in Children's Literature and Film*, edited by John Stephens, 164–84. New York: Routledge.

PUAR, Jasbir. 2007. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press.

QUIJANO, Aníbal. 2000. "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1, no. 3: 533–80.

RAO, R. Raj. 1997. "Because Most People Marry their own Kind: A Reading of Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*." *Ariel* 28, no. 1: 117–28.

SALGADO, Minoli. 2007. *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Space*. Oxon: Routledge.

SAXEY, Esther. 2008. *Homoplot: The Coming-Out Story and Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity*. New York: Peter Lang.

SEDGWICK, Eve K. 1985. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press.

SELVADURAI, Shyam. 1994. *Funny Boy*. New Delhi: Penguin.

STOCKTON, Kathryn B. 2009. *The Queer Child, or, Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Durham: Duke University Press.

WHITE, Edmund. 1982. *A Boy's Own Story*. New York: Picador, 2002.

NOTES

1. [1]. Quijano invokes eurocentred capitalism as the key vector of coloniality of power, which invariably involves "the racist model of universal social classification of the world population" (2000, 540).
2. . In similar regard, Purnima Bose analyses the collusion of capitalism, the cosmetic industry and American feminism in coercing the purportedly oppressed women of Afghanistan into what she labels "imperial modernity" (2010).
3. . I use the word "untouchable" as it is deployed in the novel. In contemporary times, the self-definitional term is Dalit.
4. . This claim is premised on Mignolo's conceptualisation of modernity and decoloniality whereby "Christian teleology" operates as a marker of Western universalism (2018, 117–20).
5. . Ruth Vanita's specious claim that modern homophobia is a western import elides the myriad expressions of homophobia, which do not exclusively comprise verbal slurs and aggression. See https://feminisminindia.com/2016/04/25/interview-with-ruth-vanita/

ABSTRACTS

In this essay, I offer a queer reading of two works of the postcolonial canon from South Asia to ask what alternative meanings emerge when ethnic, religious, cultural and national matrices are brought to bear upon queer epistemology. Exploring the interconnections between queer adolescence, revolutions and postcoloniality, I disturb neat narratives of postcolonial modernity to suggest the reorientation of South Asian fiction as a crucial outcome of the crossings.

INDEX

Keywords: Selvadurai (Shyam), Parivaraj (P.), queer adolescence, South Asia, postcolonial nonmodern, decolonial

AUTHOR

SANDEEP BAKSHI

Université de Paris, LARCA, CNRS, F-75013 Paris, France

Sandeep Bakshi researches on transnational queer/decolonial enunciation of knowledge. He received his PhD from the School of English, University of Leicester, UK, and is currently employed as Associate Professor of Postcolonial and Queer Literatures and Literary Translation at the University of Paris. Co-editor of *Decolonizing Sexualities: Transnational Perspectives, Critical Interventions* (Oxford: Counterpress, 2016), he has published on queer and race problematics in postcolonial literatures and cultures.